

CHAPTER 9

INVOLVING THE PUBLIC

OVERVIEW

The Legislature places strong emphasis on citizen participation in selecting TSEP projects. One of the statutory ranking criteria for TSEP applications rewards "projects that are high local priorities and have strong community support." As an applicant for TSEP funds, your community should have held at least one public hearing to encourage public involvement in the planning for your project. Many communities went beyond this minimum requirement and held additional community meetings to inform the public about their TSEP funded project and to solicit citizen comments.

It is in the best interest of TSEP grant recipients and the program itself, that our efforts to involve the public do not stop with the application process. This chapter describes opportunities each recipient will have to involve the public during implementation of a local TSEP project.

A. KEEPING THE PUBLIC INFORMED

There is an understandable tendency for the local officials and staff of any community to get involved in the day-to-day details of administering their TSEP project. It is easy to forget that **it is important to keep local citizens up to date on what is going on**, too. Your goal should be to keep the public informed about the TSEP project as it proceeds. On many local public facility projects, there are often plenty of "sidewalk superintendents" who are always eager to convey their impression to friends and neighbors. The best way for local officials and staff to stay ahead of the "rumor mill" is to continually make efforts to keep the public informed about what is going on and why.

Public facility projects are usually quite visible to your constituents. Utility installation and replacement projects can cause hardships on local residents. Because of this, it is of vital importance to keep the general public well informed as to street closures, delays that can be expected, and the general status of the project. A good public relations program to keep the public informed needs to be initiated prior to the commencement of construction and continued throughout the project.

Keeping people informed can help accomplish other goals related to your project, too. In many public facility projects, even with TSEP participation, there will be an increase in user charges or fees for water, sewer or solid waste. Continued publicity regarding the project helps local citizens understand why these costs must go up and makes them feel like part of the process, rather than just being on the receiving end of a higher bill or fee. Publicity also helps inform people regarding the complex issues their local governments are facing in

trying to provide adequate public facilities.

Publicity about your TSEP project can also be used to generate enthusiasm about your community and your long-term goals to revitalize your town or a neighborhood. Publicity efforts do not have to be highly sophisticated to be effective. TSEP grant recipients vary in population; from large cities of 40,000 or more to small towns with as few as 50 residents. Publicity and citizen participation efforts have to be tailored to the situation in each community.

One approach followed by many communities is to have the project engineer or manager provide progress reports to the city or town council at least monthly. Copies of the progress report can also be provided to any local newspaper or radio station.

Another option would be to have the grant administrator or members of the city council make brief presentations to local civic groups or service organizations to bring them up to date.

B. DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

Many communities with excellent public facility projects have never really received the credit they should because local officials or staff assumed that the media would hear about their efforts and publicize their activities. Recognition seldom happens without people taking active steps to inform other people about what is going on. If you can interest the media in your TSEP project you will reach a much larger audience than you can any other way. Reporters and editors are always looking for a good feature idea, especially if you will work with them and it can be developed by them as their own story, rather than just a press release.

It is always desirable if the local newspaper can provide coverage of any major meeting or event regarding the project to help keep citizens up to date on new developments. The grant administrator or the mayor can also contact the local newspaper to periodically brief the editor or reporters on the status of the community's TSEP project.

If you do a press release or are interviewed about your project, it is helpful if you mention that TSEP funds have helped to finance the project. This makes other communities aware that TSEP may be an option to help them deal with their problems and also lets people know where their Montana tax dollars are going.

A local radio talk show or call-in program can be an effective way for a grant administrator or local officials to spread the word about their TSEP project. These types of programs are always looking for new material, particularly if it will be of general interest to the public or of a "public service" nature. You can help the interviewer by making up a list of possible questions beforehand.

You should make every reasonable effort to accommodate the media staff. Find out what deadlines and schedules your local newspaper, radio or television stations follow and avoid asking them to give you coverage just before a deadline. For example, weekly newspapers have one hectic day each week when they go to press. You should find out what day it is and try to schedule any special events or meetings around it so you give the newspaper adequate time to incorporate news about your activity in the latest edition.

For any special event or meeting, prepare clear, concise background information for reporters. Reporters may be unfamiliar with the issues of concern to you and often will not have time to do background research before their deadline. Exhibit 9-A is a short description of the Montana Treasure State Endowment Program that may provide useful background information for local media staff preparing a feature on a local project.

You can also check with your local newspaper to see whether they will accept photographs or will want to take their own. If they will accept prints, find out what kind of film or prints they require. Most newspapers prefer 5 x 7 inch or 8 x 10 inch, black and white, glossy prints. Newspapers prefer shots showing some activity or an object that helps tell a story rather than group pictures of smiling faces. Where a group is photographed, try to limit the number of people photographed to no more than three. You should always accurately identify the names and titles of all the people included in the photograph.

Although local officials involved in administering a TSEP project are immersed in an alphabet soup of acronyms, try to avoid using jargon or terms that will not be familiar to the general public. Use straightforward, simple language.

C. PRESS RELEASES

Press releases should be used primarily for special events or new developments, rather than routine events. If they are used continually, they tend to be ignored.

The lead (first) paragraph should single out the answer to at least two of journalism's five "W's": who, what, when, where, and why. The remainder of the "W's" should be answered in the second paragraph. The lead paragraph should not be over four lines.

Try to begin the release with an eye-catching quote or key statement about the event you are trying to publicize. Use present tense and avoid terms such as "today" since you do not know when the article will be released.

Write your release with the most important information in the beginning, in the order of priority, so the story can be cut from the end. Give a little background on the issue, if necessary.

Releases should be kept to one page in length, whenever possible. Keep it short and simple. They should be typed, double-spaced, on one side only.

If you do a press release for the radio station or the newspaper, make sure that it includes the name and telephone number of a person who can be contacted for further information. Newspapers or radio stations rarely use a press release as it is written, so it is a real help to them if they can call someone to ask additional questions or clarify key points. This will also give local officials or a grant administrator an opportunity to elaborate on the release or emphasize important aspects of the story.

The release should always be distributed sufficiently in advance for news people to plan ahead; do not send it at the last minute and expect prominent coverage.

Exhibit 9-B is a sample format for preparing a press release.

D. PROJECT SIGNS

A long-standing requirement for many federal funding programs involving the construction of public facilities is that the community erect a sign on or near the project site which describes the purpose of the project and the various funding sources. Some federal agencies, even require that bid specifications contain construction details for project signs including dimensions, size and type of lettering, and specific colors of paint.

For many years, MDOC has strongly encouraged grant recipients to erect project signs to publicize the project and the sources of funding. Publicity about the project helps local citizens feel involved in the project. A well-done project sign can help generate enthusiasm about your project and give people the feeling that things are happening in the community or neighborhood. It also lets the public know that something worthwhile is being accomplished with their federal or state tax dollars. **TSEP grant recipients are required to put up a sign publicizing the project and showing that TSEP funds are helping to fund the project.**

Reasonable costs for preparing project signs is an eligible use of grant funds. Like the other aspects of publicity for a local TSEP project, a project sign does not have to be professionally done to be effective. The Town of Chester, for example, had a high school shop class paint their sign on a 4 X 8 foot sheet of plywood for the "Chester Northside Water System Improvements" TSEP project. The standard elements of a project sign are shown in the example in Exhibit 9-C. If another funding program requires a project sign and has specifications for size or color, that will suffice, as long as the TSEP is credited and its financial participation listed along with the other funding agency or programs. A single sign may be located at a major construction site or signs may be located at multiple sites, depending upon the nature of the project. For a community-wide project, local officials may choose to erect signs at the principal town entrances.

The sign must be reasonably visible (a 4 X 8 foot sign is recommended). In addition to information about the project, **the following information is required to be on the sign:**

- ☐ **Treasure State Endowment Program**
- ☐ **Montana Department of Commerce**
- ☐ **That it is a grant and the amount**

E. SPECIAL EVENTS

Special events, such as a ground breaking ceremony for a new water treatment plant can be used to let people know what is happening and to generate enthusiasm. For example, the Town of Culbertson held an open house, complete with hot dogs and soft drinks, to show off the town's new water treatment plant. Local public works staff also conducted guided tours for science classes from local schools to describe how the new plant operated to provide safe drinking water for the community. The students told their families what they had seen and increased community awareness of the project.

During any special event, the mayor or county commissioners can invite the Governor or state legislators to cut a ribbon or tour the project. In particular, letting our state Senators and Representatives know what Montana communities are accomplishing with TSEP funds is important to them. State legislators rarely ever hear about the good achieved with state funds; instead they get only the complaints when a citizen is dissatisfied. In making the tough decisions they face regarding competing needs in the state budget, they need to know which programs are providing real benefits for their constituents. Letting them know that TSEP funds can make a difference is important to all of Montana's communities.

F. PAMPHLETS OR NEWSLETTERS

Pamphlets can be an excellent way to educate and inform people. Keep the material short and to the point. In a public facilities project, for example, they could be mailed out with monthly water or sewer bills to keep people informed about the progress of the community's TSEP project.

While most local projects are not of a scale that would justify developing a newsletter just for a TSEP project, it may be possible to use other existing newsletters such as those published by local churches or the county extension agent to get the word out on the local TSEP project.

G. POSTERS

Posters have long been a common approach for publicizing local activities, special events,

or public meetings. Posters should be neat, attractive, and not so large that they will take up too much space on a bulletin board or a storefront window. Posters should only be displayed for a week or two. If they are posted longer, they tend to be ignored. They are inexpensive and have many options for placement such as town halls, banks, grocery stores, welfare offices, churches, senior centers, libraries, and laundromats - wherever the public might slow enough to read your message. Remember to ask permission, before you put them up.

H. DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS

Unfortunately, no discussion of how to deal with the public for a TSEP project would be complete without mentioning the TSEP grant recipient's responsibility for dealing with complaints. Though local officials are doing their best to improve their community through their TSEP project, human nature seems to guarantee that some citizen, at some time, will probably be dissatisfied with some aspect of the project. In a public facility project, a taxpayer may feel that the proposed project is poorly designed or too expensive or that the new water or sewer rate is too high. Some residents may be concerned that construction activity may damage their property (or already has).

Local citizens obviously have the right to offer their views at any point during the development and implementation of a TSEP project. The general public needs to know who to contact with their complaints or questions about construction activity. Community officials and staff are usually the ones who get the calls. When a call is received, the caller should either be given the telephone number of the grant administrator or project engineer's representative, or their name, telephone number, time of call, and the nature of the complaint or question should be written down in order to have the proper person return their call. This information should be given to the engineer's representative who will investigate the issue and, if appropriate, order the contractor to make any necessary repairs to correct a problem. In any event, the engineer should report back to the community with the status of the complaint or question.

Any comment, suggestion, criticism, or complaint made by a citizen should be taken very seriously and deserves a prompt response. As a rule of thumb, the more promptly local officials, the grant administrator, or project engineer can investigate the basis for a complaint and try to offer a reasonable solution, the better. It is human nature for the citizen lodging the complaint to feel that they are being ignored if the community does not respond with at least a telephone call immediately to investigate the situation. The longer the time before they are contacted, the greater will be their frustration or anger. The usual pattern, if a citizen does not receive a quick and adequate response, is that the next complaint is lodged with MDOC, the Governor, a state legislator, or the local newspaper. A complaint at this level can create a lasting negative impression regarding the worth or effectiveness of the Treasure State Endowment Program or the soundness of the state's or the local government's administration of the program.

The normal procedure, if a complaint is filed with MDOC, the Governor, or a state legislator, is that the complaint will be referred to local officials for response. MDOC will not dictate the form or manner of the response to local officials. The Department's staff is available to advise the community regarding any state requirement that may be at question. In all cases, the final resolution of the complaint is the authority and responsibility of the TSEP grant recipient. When the TSEP grant recipient has reached a decision as to whether or how the complaint is to be resolved, MDOC will communicate the local government's decision to the agency or office that originally referred it to MDOC for action.

Records of all citizen comments, whether in the form of letters or written notes summarizing telephoned or oral comments, should be placed in the citizen participation file for the project, along with the community's letter of reply or notes indicating how the TSEP grant recipient responded to the comment. Hopefully, the citizen participation file will be filled with compliments, rather than complaints.

CHAPTER 9

EXHIBITS

- 9-A Summary of the Treasure State Endowment Program
- 9-B Sample Format for a News Release
- 9-C Sample Project Sign Format